



# A FEMININE JOURNEY FROM IDEALISM TO REALISM IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S KANYADAAN

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## ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar's the most controversial work, *Kanyadaan* is a naturalistic play based on the obnoxious man-woman relationship in a domestic cultural world. The play which stands as a glaring example of vindication of women explores the problems of casteism and the playwright shows that it is almost an incurable malady even in a progressive modern society. He illustrates dramatically that inter-caste marriage can never be a solution for a casteless society and obliquely hints at the suffering predicament of the women in a patriarchal society. The female protagonist of the play completes her odyssey of innocence to experience through the sacrosanct institution of marriage rendering a new meaning and significance in her life. The Hindu marriage system that makes a woman 'diasporic' leads to loss of her identity in the marital world. She remains in a flux in the so-called social 'production' where hardly she is given space to vent forth her feelings and have a voice of her own. My article focuses on the fact that his female 'other' undergoes a host of changes, experiences different emotions and sentiments, but she never gives in, creates her individual identity and thus gives birth to a new poetics in Tendulkar's theatre world. The underlying dictum of my critique in general is that women are not inevitably destined to be the 'other' in the hierarchical power structure of the society.

**KEYWORDS :** Other, Subaltern, Panopticon, Diaspora.

**JYOTI:** I have to stop thinking and learn to live. (Act Two, Scene Three 565)

The firm statement of Jyoti, the mouthpiece in Vijay Tendulkar's drama *Kanyadaan*, stands up against the submissive role that women are taught to 'learn' in a patriarchal Indian society. One of the leading pillars of Marathi theatre of 70's, Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (6<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1928 – 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2008) holds an iconoclastic attitude towards the socio-cultural-economic society which projected him as a controversial theatre-artist. Labeled as a conformist, this striking writer's dramatic concern was naturalistic par excellence. His motif was to give the civilization a great shock by crafting a new realism for his audience. The summing up of Tendulkar's approach was best done by Shabana Azmi who played the role of Sarita in *Kamla* (1985) filmed from his play *Kamala* (1982), "He takes no positions, waves no flags, just focuses on truth."

This *avant garde* Marathi playwright dealt aggressively with issues concerning politics, violence, sexuality and gender. The 'covert' and 'overt' forms of violence among human beings are his abiding concerns in almost all his plays. Apart from writing about social issues, Tendulkar dealt with the marginalized section of the society – the other<sup>1</sup> ignoring the orthodox injunctions of the social order. G.B. Deshpande appositely remarks, "He had little use for those morals and mores, which were a curious mixture of brahmanical and Victorian mores" (19). This conventional Victorian probity has also been provokingly attacked by Bernard Shaw satirizing the structures of sexual polarity by reversing the pursuit of women by men in marital relations which customarily focuses on female subordination. In post independent India, Tendulkar does the same emancipating his women characters from male dominance portraying them not as Others.

In the pattern of female Other it is found that women are consigned as a gendered class. Gender, race, class and ethnicity categorize society as a whole and form an array of contexts for family living through their unequal division of social and cultural opportunities. They form the relational systems of power, control, subjugation and subordination in diverse institutions including family, education and religion, literature, sexuality bearing the imprint of hegemony. Gender and class shape the controlling dynamics for women's existential anguish in the matrix of domination. Women are socially defined and treated unequally both in the macro and the micro world. Structured gender disparity interrelates with class and racial inequalities to sort men and women differently privileging men at the expense of women in public, private and capitalist patriarchy. It thus raises fundamental questions relating to 'gender trouble' caused by patriarchy.

The position and the predicament of women in human society has always been an issue of critical and clinical exploration. German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche's remark that "Woman was God's second mistake" stigmatizes the status of women in the socio-cultural milieu. Even Aristotle felt that it is natural for a woman to lead a quiet, sedentary life, staying indoors to nurture children and preserve possessions acquired by her 'natural ruler' man. Leaving aside the European thinkers, when we enter the thinking zone of the Indian philosopher Manu we find him as the most serious attacker on woman, "Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently" (*Manusmriti* 5/151).

A woman, both in Orient and Occident culture, is pushed to the periphery away from the powerful vivacious centre denying her a genuine and dependable presence. A subaltern<sup>2</sup> is thus created having no sense of being.

*Subaltern* refers to the populations that are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. They hardly have any voice of their own and are deprived of any sort of dignity and distinction. Similarly women signifying all the lacks and voids are exploited to undergo a subaltern position in any society. The predicament of the female subaltern is the most miserable of all oppressive states prevalent in the social order. These doubly subordinate entities become a victim of racism, classism and patriarchy. Female subalterns are thus subject to silence. And this 'silence' has been dramatized meta-theatrically by Tendulkar in his *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968).

The controversial theatre-artist has dealt with the concept of female 'other' in a realistic and naturalistic manner giving a photographic impression to the audience that a woman has no room of her own. Tendulkar punctures the inherent hypocrisy lying in every Indian household. He vividly portrays a family as a marital custody for women who are 'still mere slaves.' Arundhati Banerjee's observation is quite relevant in this regard:

... the evaluation of the role of Indian woman within the institution called marriage, considered to be the holiest of the holy in our society, definitely provides a completely novel point of view showing that women are still mere slaves to their male owners in Indian society in the later half of the twentieth century. (xvii-xviii)

Women are under constant watch by men not only in the economic field but also in their own domestic arena. The unseen yet understood 'set of laws' construct the gender in a male-deterministic world. It thus threatens the groundlessness of democracy and modernity of a society that worships male supremacy. Marriage relation is the most intense focus of constraints for the women who are kept under constant surveillance by patriarchal code of conduct. Here Tendulkar has theatricalised the social concept of panopticon<sup>3</sup> that well promise a utilitarian family to a social culture.

## II

Tendulkar's Saraswati Samman awarded play *Kanyadaan* is an enactment of cultural identity, class and gender conflict and women diaspora<sup>4</sup>. The title *Kanyadaan* suggests that it is a play based on marriage in an Indian family. The word 'kanyadaan' itself bears the traditional Hindu meaning of a father gifting a maiden daughter 'kanya' to a groom through the festive ritual of a marriage ceremony. In the same way the play revolves around an experimentation of a father, Nath Devalikar, an MLA with a socialite outlook to life, class and culture sacrificing his daughter, Jyoti, to Arun Athavale, a Dalit B.A. class student-poet. Jyoti an upper-class Brahmin is under an illusion that she will live a happy life filled with love and certitude after their marriage and her fantasy is duly supported by her father as he dreams of a casteless society. But this baseless idealism is ruled out by her open-minded socialist mother, Seva and her brother, Jayaprakash.

Seva repeatedly warns them of the adverse effects of this 'wrong move' and strikes a burning subdued menace focusing on the fact that it is the woman who suffers more in any marital relationship. When Nath takes Arun's side and support this experimented marriage, Seva staunchly says:

Does it mean that my daughter's life is to be used for an experiment? Is that what you are saying? You may have your views. I cannot accept them. I am her mother. If you ask me I will say that Jyoti can never be happy with that man. . . If you like take it from me in writing. (Act One, Scene Two 524)

Educated Jyoti is unaware of this 'gender trouble' and becomes a part both of her father's experiment and Arun's 'jolly game' to catch a 'Brahmin dame.'

The incongruent marriage consequently happens and it soon proves challenging for each characters. Arun sees Jyoti's Brahmin identity as a challenge to his Dalit masculinity. As an arrogant untouchable he takes pride in conquering Jyoti to uphold his backward community. He bluntly puts "it's your marriage which will fizzle out" (Act One, Scene two 514) as Jyoti's family would suffer for not being able to triumph over an idealism. She as a result becomes a scapegoat in the world of marital politics that forces her to say boldly, "I will manage mother." She becomes a diasporic figure and a go-between two cultures where she is in a 'no-exit' situation in this utopian concept.

What was an 'experiment' for her father turned out to be a commitment for her. Nath gets disappointed and disillusioned when he finds his model experiment crumbling down. His daughter firmly decides, "I have to accept him as he is, because I cannot reject him," (Act Two, Scene Three 564) who is "the beast, and the lover," "the demon, and also the poet' husband for her. Arun accordingly proves himself to be a Caliban-figure in whose nature 'nurture' will never stick. Considering his complex behaviour, Jyoti reveals, "I must understand this complexity. It is no use running away." Nath's reforming zeal gets a shocking blow when Jyoti breaks all ties with her family and claims herself to be a member of Dalit community. She even holds her father responsible for "having ruined her whole life?" by wasting "twenty years" of her life as she was falsely "guided by her father's humanism and liberalism" (558). Sacrificing her own life at the altar of two patriarchs she attains a brighter vision of 'being,' "I had to learn it on the strength of my own experience" (563). Jyoti evolves as the female 'other' in the established patriarchal cultural world.

### III

Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* is an ironical indictment on marital politics in a caste-based Indian society. It has an unparalleled performance directed by Lillete Dubey having a strong cast of Lillete Dubey, Joy Sengupta, Radhika Apte and Raghav Chahana. The "Antaheen" film actress Radhika Apte states that she likes 'exciting roles' that makes her play "a girl from a socialist family" in the English play *Kanyadaan* (The Telegraph Calcutta India 17<sup>th</sup> March 2009). Even Ballygunge Swapnasuchana presented a Bengali translation of the play in Kolkata, directed by renowned director-actor and our reverend Minister Bratya Basu. The presentation reminded us that *Kanyadaan* transcends barriers of time, culture, education and gender in today's 'shining' India (Shoma Chatterji India Together). Bratya Basu was striking in his act of stepping into the Dalit character of Arun Athavale and Sohini Sengupta touches the heart of the audience by enacting her transforming journey from a docile, humble daddy's girl to a composed subaltern of an uneducated class. Both the regional theatre groups portrayed the diverse layers of violence making it have a contemporary appeal. Reproduced as an Afterword to *Kanyadaan*, translated by Gowri Ramnarayan it is stated as:

... it is not possible to improve people and change society. Tendulkar has focused on a problem that there is no bridge between the various sections of society, and that the attempt to overcome a taboo often leads to greater pitfalls than one can handle. (Tendulkar 597)

Like the Italian writer Luigi Pirandello, Tendulkar adopts the genre of naturalistic drama to create an illusion of reality in an inescapable sordid environment. He exposes the hypocrisy and pretension of the Gandhian father who dreams about a fake romantic notion of building a casteless society by sacrificing his daughter's life. Nath's hallucination of uniting the civilized and the barbaric proved to be detrimental to a class conscious society. Tendulkar habitually unmasks the complacency of the so-called liberal and esteemed people of the society that shakes the foundations of the marriage system. His unabashed exploration of the fact that a nation unconsciously insist on maintaining a society based on 'power and pleasure principle' touches our psyche that we are not yet ready to acknowledge.

### IV

Grirsh Kamad's view about his contemporary playwright that "No one understood the sense of humiliation (of women) as Vijay Tendulkar did" points out the series of sufferings and agonies of the women as victims in a hegemonic power-structure. When the eminent postcolonial critics like Ania Loomba and Gayatri Spivak expound that the female body is created for the satisfaction of male sexual fantasy and desire, we find a haunting similarity in our task of probing the plight of Tendulkar's women. Though critics form a consensus of opinion that the playwright assigns some importance to the portraiture of women, they are essentially

marginalized objects in the interlocking subjects of sexual politics and power politics. Silencing the voices of women (if there is any) had been the practice of the patriarchal society from a time long past and also enjoys contemporary relevance.

Spivak's seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) may be taken up as a theoretical base to study the plight of women in Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan*. "If . . . the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Ashcroft 28). The action of the play is pivoted around Jyoti who is the centrifugal force in the trial. Her predicament is that of a shuttle cork. She has to tune as a daughter while growing up in an idyllic father's environment and yet again harmonize her insight that stood as poles apart from her maiden romantic life with her mismatched husband. So Jyoti is relegated from the centre ruled by the male patriarch to the margin, the accepted veritable hell of the female. The other female counterpart of the play, her mother Seva, similarly, is fated with no voice of her own. Her constant forewarnings about the worse consequences of her daughter's disparate marriage made no mark in her husband's impractical experiment. As a result of this Jyoti has to succumb to both her father's and husband's will.

But Tendulkar's Jyoti here makes a silent protest in her own terms. She, unlike Ibsen's Nora does not make a rebel exit from her husband's home but rather chooses to yield to be a 'victim' in her husband's residence to attest to her father's failed concept. She realizes gradually that she has "to go and get on with the struggle" (564). There is no running away for her nor does she take heroism in such an escape. She rather becomes calm and composed and asserts at the closing stages of the play:

Jyoti: . . . The poison has numbed our entire consciousness. We cannot run away. To save one's self by running away may be the smart thing to do, and other people may get away with this kind of cleverness, but even if running away was the general rule of conduct, we shall continue to recite 'March on, Oh soldier!' and continue to lose our lives as guinea pigs in the experiment. (565)

So the apparently 'other-ed' figure of the play Jyoti accomplishes her emancipation in the domestic colonization; though the egotistical, hypocritical and authoritarian attitude of patriarchy limits women's liberty only in their sexual roles as culminated into wifehood and motherhood. It can be concluded by quoting Mahesh Bhatt that through Jyoti in *Kanyadaan* Tendulkar proves all over again that he is "a man with insight and extraordinary courage to be ordinary."

### Notes

1. The term 'other' is employed throughout critical discourse in different ways. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, there is the 'Other' and the 'other' – the former signifies that which is not really other but is a projection of the ego; the latter signifies an imaginary or subjective identification.
2. The term 'subaltern' was first coined by Antonio Gramsci and popularized by Spivak. It refers to the underprivileged people of the third world countries who live in the margin of the country, having no means of advancement.
3. Panopticon' is a form of institutional structure designed by English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The conception of the design is to allow a watchman to observe (-opticon) all (pan-) inmates of an institute without their knowledge of they being watched. Having a reference to 'Panoptes' from Greek mythology, Michel Foucault extends the idea to denote social vigilance in many places.
4. Diaspora' is a scattered population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area. Languages and cultures are transformed when they come in contact with the others. The location and dislocation of cultures make the individuals harp on their memories.

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